

# Robert Willan's Description and Treatment of Cutaneous Diseases 1797/1798: A Bicentennial

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Go, and catch a falling star,  
...  
Tell me, where all past years are.  
(John Donne, 1572–1631, Song)

Robert Willan was the author of the first real textbook of skin diseases, presenting a systematic description of clinical lesions and a depiction of characteristic efflorescences. The frontispiece reads 1798, but the note "To the Publick" says "Red Lion Square, Nov. 20 1797" (Willan, 1798), around from Red Lion Street and the name giving inn where convicts were allowed their last drink on the way from Newgate prison to St. Giles gallows, in the Holborn district of London (Bebbington, 1972).

Mercurialis, Haffner, Turner, Plenck, and Lorry wrote earlier treatises on skin diseases between 1572 and 1777. Willan was a careful historian and he referred to all of these and many more from earlier periods. Especially Lorry, who called skin an organ, but also Plenck, who drew up a preliminary list of clinically typical lesions, are quoted repeatedly (Plenck, 1776; Lorry, 1777). Plenck is named by Thomas Bateman, posthumous editor of his master's complete work, as having "alone any pretensions to accuracy" (Bateman, 1817). It is undoubtedly Willan who perfectionized Plenck's meager approach to clinical definition with his voluminous text and detailed color prints. The first fascicle was published in 1798 (Willan, 1798), "volume one" followed in 1808 (Willan, 1808), the complete edition supplemented and edited by Bateman appeared in 1813 (Bateman, 1813), and the entire set of prints appeared in 1817 (Bateman, 1817). The first German edition of the first fascicle was printed in 1799 (Willan, 1799), and the first American edition of "volume one" in 1809 (Willan, 1809). Of various later editions in several languages on either side of the Atlantic, one published by Weimer that combined text and prints is particularly beautiful (Bateman, 1818, 1830).

Seguini Henry Jackson (1792), Vincenzo Chiarugi (1799), and Jean-Louis Alibert (1806) were contemporary authors. The Englishman coined a term, the Italian became the first professor of the speciality, and the Frenchman became the first head of a famous school. The beauty of Alibert's prints enchants the perennial reader—equaled in the first half of the last century only by Devergie's atlas of syphilis—the text, however, drew criticism. Alibert started off his atlas "J'entre dans une carrière presque déserte, où peu d'hommes ont pénétré avant moi, où aucun travail antérieur ne m'a servi de guide, où tout est nouveau pour l'observation, où tout est problème pour la pensée" (Alibert, 1806). Bateman had a different view and wrote, "M. Alibert, with loud pretensions to superior skill and much vaunting of the services which he has rendered this department of medicine, has, in fact, contributed nothing to the elucidation of the obscurity in which it is veiled. The merit of his publication belongs principally to the artists" (p. xii of the preface in the 1813 volume) (Bateman, 1813).



**Figure 1.** Acne simplex punctata (plate lxii of the 1817 edition by Bateman).

Willan's prints are almost as beautiful and typical (**Fig 1**). The lucid description could stem from Albert Kligman's pen (plate lxii of the 1817 edition) (Bateman, 1817).

One more point, to put the Briton's merits into proper perspective. Willan was the first physician to receive an award for a treatise on diseases of the skin: The John Fothergillian Medal, by the Medical Society of London (Holubar, 1991). He was the second to receive it, the first, lege artis, on March 8, John Fothergill's birthday, in 1790. This invited treatise formed the basis of the later volume (introduction of the 1808 edition, p. ix) (Willan, 1808).

Robert Willan, a quaker, was born in Yorkshire on November 12, 1757; he died 185 years ago in Madeira on April 7, 1812. His birthplace is neatly kept, and although his grave site is not exactly known anymore, his tombstone is preserved on a wall of the British Cemetery in Funchal. Both sites are accessible to the dermatologic pilgrim's step.

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Manuscript received August 13, 1997; accepted for publication September 29, 1997

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